Images that don't fit: »Buddhism« vs. Japanese Buddhist Objects

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IMAGES THAT DON'T FIT: "BUDDHISM" VS. JAPANESE BUDDHIST OBJECTS

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"Buddhism" Imagined vs. Buddhist Images

There is an obvious disconnect between the Buddhist icons from Japan present since the last decades of the 19th century in European museums, and the images of Buddhism (and Japanese religion) that were shaped at that time and prevailed in European intellectual history for most of the 20th century. Intellectually, Buddhism was conceived of primarily as a world-renouncing religion with a negative attitude towards both linguistic and artistic symbolism. Indologists emphasised the notions of karmic causation and emptiness, while Western recipients and followers of Suzuki Daisetz' innovative reinterpretation of Zen Buddhism envisioned Buddhism as a mystic philosophy reaching beyond words and concepts towards an *immediate* experience of enlightenment. These imaginations of Buddhism contrast sharply with the plethora of ritual implements and sacral images that, from the latter half of the 19th century onward, had been brought from Japan to Europe and had ended up in its museums. These objects bear clear witness to Buddhism as a popular, devotional Japanese religion that was strongly integrated into the local sacral landscape. However, this contrast for a long time did not lead to a re-evaluation of the image of Buddhism. Instead, the objects were relegated to a status of minor importance, if not oblivion.

It is my hypothesis that this ignorance concerning Japanese Buddhist objects is best explained in terms of the "cognitive dissonance" between their symbolism and preconceptions of religion and art in general and Buddhism and Japan in particular that were popular at the time. Since Buddhist objects and images did not fit into any of the paradigms associated with cultural value, they could only be perceived in the residual category of "popular devotionalism/superstition", which automatically relegated them to a status of minor importance. This, at the same time, helped to stabilise the prominent paradigms of Buddhism as a "world religion", the idea of distinctly national traditions which

would see Shinto, and not Buddhism, as the "autochthonous religion" of Japan, and of art as the expressive realisation of *aesthetic* value.

In order to elucidate this hypothesis, I want to briefly review some of the general frameworks of understanding concerning religion, national traditions, and art that were in operation in the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century. I will then go on to explore the image of Buddhism held and propagated by some seminal scholars of that age. Finally, I shall take up some of the works held in European Museums and show how they contrast with these expectations concerning religion in general, Buddhism in the particular, and art.

Frameworks of Understanding

The dominant world view of classical modernity is based on a mono-linear and evolutionary image of history. The victorious course of the capitalist economy with its inbuilt pressure for continuous innovation and increase of efficiency formed the background (if not the motor) for imagining history as progress. This had the ingratiating effect that the most powerful nations of the age of imperialism could conceive of themselves, their institutions and their cultural norms as the "most advanced" and the measure of all cultural phenomena. An important part of this imagination of culture would be that the division of labour that was at the heart of a capitalist economy would also be projected as the norm towards all areas of culture, producing ideals of "pure" religion, art, literature, and the like.

With respect to religion, this meant that its modern concept was strongly informed by the religion of the most successful ("advanced") modern nations, i.e. protestant Christianity (Smith 1998).[1] The standard concept of "religion" was thus built from the elements of monotheism, faith in a clearly formulated and rationally defined doctrine documented in an original (written) source, a founding figure that would at the same time be an exemplar of perfect humanity, and a separation of political and religious institutions.

The protestant impetus to favour the original source over the accretions added by historical tradition was echoed in philology (the most important science of the 19th century) by the search for "classics" that would represent the "pure" state of full realisation of the "essence" of a tradition. In this paradigm, later additions as well as any influx of "external" elements could only be perceived as a sign of "degeneration". In conjunction with the 19th century idea of the nation, this also meant that traditions that were the subject of the "new philologies" would have their proper locus in the nation where they originated,

[1] This „asymmetrical center of ‚religion'" was noted in Japan early on (Josephson 2006: 146). Postcolonial criticism has produced a vast literature reviewing the concept of religion, culminating in Smiths own declaration that "[r]eligion is solely the creation of the scholar's study" (Smith 1997: xi). Most pertinent for the Japanese case is the volume *Shūkyō saikō*, edited by Shimazono Susumu 2004; see also Fitzgerald 1997.

and that mixtures of traditions would be frowned upon, especially if they were of different "national origin".[2]

These general constituents of the paradigm of classical modernity primarily meant two things for the "Buddha Way" (as it had traditionally been termed in East Asia):

1) The various articulations of the "Buddha Way" were theoretically united into one religion, i.e. "Buddhism"[3], which was perceived as an "Indian Religion"; the essence of "Buddhism" was, therefore, located in the Indian sources – a stance still reflected in the naming of *The Japanese Association of Indian and Buddhist Studies* (*Indogaku bukkyōgakkai),* founded in 1951, and in the organisation of many contemporary introductions to Buddhism.[4] Buddhist ways outside India, therefore, were relegated to a secondary status, their doctrinal changes and adaptations to local world views and traditions being regarded as deviations from the true essence of the pure religion.

2) The "essence" of "Buddhism" was sought in a doctrine centred on the founder, and documented in written expositions. In order for the Buddha Way to be accepted as a "world religion" in the same class (although not on a par) with Christianity, this "essence" would have to conform to the expectations of "rationality" and, first and foremost, be free from elements of "superstition". This provided a strong incentive for scholars as well as for the representatives of Buddhist denominations to focus on the elements of doctrine that could be presented in a "universal" or "rational" way, and to purge their ways, or at least the representations of their ways, from all the elements related to the "despicable" realms of magic, belief in ghosts and spirits, miracles, and so forth.[5]

As for objects representing the material culture of the Buddha Way, they would "naturally" receive an inferior status in light of the emphasis the Protestant view placed on doctrinal scripture. Moreover, those with a clear connection to ritual would naturally suffer from the disregard in which this aspect of religious life was held by the modern (Protestant) view (Grimm 1992). However, even Buddhist painting and sculpture was bound to be perceived as inferior, simply because it was created not for aesthetic value, but for a purpose external to "pure" art. Needless to say, everything connected to apotropaic or thaumaturgic practices would be rel-

[2] This is, of course, a grossly generalised account; see Anderson 1983: 67–82 for a more nuanced analysis.

[3] Schmithausen (1992) cites E. Burnouf: *Introduction à l'histoire du Bouddhisme indien* (Paris 1844) as an early scholarly use of the term "Buddhism".

[4] Harvey 1990 is a good example: compare the chapter headings of the first part (on doctrine): The Buddha and his Indian context – Early Buddhist teachings: rebirth and karma – Early Buddhist teachings: the four holy truths – Early developments in Buddhism – Mahāyāna philosophy – Mahāyāna holy beings – The later history and spread of Buddhism.

[5] An exemplary study of this transformation in Japan is Josephson's portrait of Inoue Enryō (Josephson 2006).

egated to an object of (more or less contemptuous) ethnological curiosity.

Classical Modern Images of Buddhism

In order to appreciate the framework of reference in which Japanese Buddhist objects would be regarded (or rather, disregarded) in late 19th and early 20th century Europe, it is instructive to review some prominent descriptions and evaluations of this religion. In the following, I will focus mainly on German scholars, but I believe a similar argument could be made in reference to the French or English scholarship of the time (these being the leading academic languages of the day).

G. W. F. Hegel treated Buddhism under the older name[6] of "the religion of Fo" in his lectures on the philosophy of religion. His description is significant insofar as his vision of intellectual world history was extremely influential for classical modernity (Morton (n.d.: par. 15), in tracing the impact of Hegel's ideas on Buddhism, cites Adorno, Sartre and Žižek), but also because it preceded the advent of Orientalist philologies[7] and followed earlier philosophical authors such as Leibniz and Kant. Hegel's immediate sources apparently were a collection of travel reports published in 1750 (N.N. *et al.* 1750), and a report by the English researcher Samuel Turner (Morton n.d.: par. 5). According to his description in the Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, which echoes a seminal passage from the *Allgemeine Historie* (N.N. *et al.* 1750: 368, quoted in Morton n.d.: par 6), the essence of Buddhist doctrine consists in a simple negation of the world:

> [Buddhists] say that everything emerges from nothing, everything returns to nothing. That is the absolute foundation, he indeterminate, the negated being of everything particular, so that all particular existences or actualities are only forms, and only the nothing has genuine independence, while in contrast all other actuality has none; it counts only as something accidental, an indifferent form. [...] For a human being, this state of negation is the highest state: one must immerse oneself in this nothing, in the eternal tranquillity of the nothing generally, in the substantial in which all determinations cease, where there is no virtue or intelligence, where all movement annuls itself. All characteristics of both natural life and spiritual life have vanished. To be blissful, human beings themselves must strive, through ceaseless internal mindfulness, to will nothing, to want [nothing], and to do nothing.[8]

[6] A term used by authors of the age of enlightenment; see Grimm, 1992: 960.

[7] Although the first works of Indologists were accessible at Hegel's time, he apparently took less note of them than some of his contemporaries, like Schelling or Schopenhauer; see Cross 2008.

[8] „[...] das Nichts und das Nichtsein ist das Letzte und Höchste. Nur das Nichts hat wahrhafte Selbständigkeit, alle andere Wirklichkeit, alles Besondere hat keine. Aus Nichts ist alles hervorgegangen, in Nichts geht alles zurück. Das Nichts ist das Eine, der Anfang und das Ende von allem. So verschiedenartig die Menschen und Dinge sind, so ist nur das eine Prinzip, das Nichts, woraus sie hervorgehen, und nur die Form macht die Qualität, die Verschiedenheit aus. [...] so ist für den Menschen ebenso dieser *Zustand der Vernichtung* der höchste, und seine Bestimmung ist, sich zu vertiefen in dieses Nichts, die ewige Ruhe, das Nichts überhaupt, in das Substantielle, wo alle Bestimmungen aufhören, kein Wille, keine Intelligenz ist. Durch fortwährendes Vertiefen und Sinnen in sich soll der Mensch diesem Prinzip gleich werden, er soll ohne Leidenschaft sein, ohne Neigung, ohne Handlung und zu diesem Zustand kommen, nichts zu wollen und nichts zu tun." (Hegel 1986, I: 377; 385–386. English translation quoted after Morton n.d.: par. 12.

Hegel consequently evaluated the religion of Fo as a religion of mere abstraction and simple negation, classifying it as the "religion of being in itself" (*Religion des Insichseins*) and grouping it, along with magic, Chinese religion, and Brahmanism among the "nature religions" (*Naturreligion*).

His identification of Buddhism as a religion of abstract, indiscriminate negation fits well with the enlightenment's contempt of Buddhism, which was perceived as a quietistic religion, and, consequently, as inimical to scientific and social progress. It is significant that Hegel's adversary Schopenhauer basically followed him in the description of Buddhism as a religion of pure negation, but not in his evaluation: In equating the essence of Buddhism with his own pessimistic view[9], he evaluated it positively, as is evident from the closing sentence of his *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung,* and a note added in the third edition:

> Whatever remains after the Will has vanished must seem to those who are still filled by it nothing. But to the man in whom the Will has turned and negated itself, this world, so real to us with all its suns and Milky Ways, is – nothing. N.: This is precisely the "Pradschna-Paramita" of the Buddhists, the 'Beyond All Knowledge', i.e., the point where subject and object no longer exist. (See I.J. Schmidt, "Ueber das Mahajana und Pradschna-Paramita".)[10]

Schopenhauer's view of Buddhism was influential for both the philosophical reception of Buddhism (including Nietzsche) and fledgling German Indology and Buddhology. A central figure uniting both sides was Paul Deussen, whose popular *Elements of Metaphysics* (Deussen1875) attempted "a synthesis of Schopenhauer, *Vedānta,* Kant (as understood by Schopenhauer) and Christianity" (Atzert 2008: 85). Georg Grimm, another ardent reader of Schopenhauer's (Atzert 2008: 87–88), was a co-founder of one of the first Buddhist communities in Germany.

[9] For a critical assessment of Schopenhauer's relation to pertinent strands of Buddhist thought, see Abelsen 1993.While Schopenhauer insisted that he had come to know of the perceived identity only after forming his own ideas, there is reason to believe that he had knowledge of Buddhist thought earlier than he was willing to admit (App 2008).

[10] „[...] was nach gänzlicher Aufhebung des Willens übrig bleibt, ist für alle Die, welche noch des Willens voll sind, allerdings Nichts. Aber auch umgekehrt ist Denen, in welchen der Wille sich gewendet und verneint hat, diese unsere so sehr reale Welt mit allen ihren Sonnen und Milchstraßen – Nichts. ... Dieses ist eben auch das Pradschna-Paramita der Buddhaisten, das »Jenseit aller Erkenntniß«, d.h. der Punkt, wo Subjekt und Objekt nicht mehr sind." (See I.J. Schmidt: »Ueber das Mahajana und Pradschna-Paramita«.) (Schopenhauer, 1977: 509. English translation quoted after Abelsen 1993: 259)

A slightly different approach to Buddhism is represented by the work of Indologist Hermann Oldenberg (1854–1920), whose book *Buddha: Sein Leben, mseine Lehre, seine Gemeinde* [Buddha: His life, his teaching, his community] (OLDENBERG 1921) remained a standard reference work for a long time. Oldenberg exemplifies classical modern German philology in his quest for historical accuracy, in his emphasis on "original" (early) sources, and in his nationalist-ethnicist outlook, which becomes evident in the following description of his method:

Evidently it has to be our first task to characterize the *historical, national preconditions*, the ground on which Buddhism rests, and especially the religious life and the philosophical speculation of pre-Buddhist India.[11] (emphasis mine)

Oldenberg foregrounds two elements of these "historical, national preconditions" that would become lasting elements of the German discourse on Buddhism: Firstly, he emphasises the importance of the 'Aryan invasion' for Indian culture (and, therefore, Buddhism)[12] and, secondly, he highlights a substantial change that took place between the "Aryan, the proud relative of the Greeks and Germanians" and the "Hindu [...] with his weakness and amenable smoothness, his nervosity, his hot sensuality"[13], which he relates to the tropic climate and the "inevitable mixtures with darker indigenous peoples"[14]. As a result, he says, "that trait of action-averse weakness imprinted itself on the ethnic soul that lasted through all changes of its destiny and that will remain as long as there is an Indian people."[15]

Now, in relation to this description of the historical background of Buddhism, I find it significant that Oldenberg shows some reservations in designating its doctrine as pessimistic. The Buddhist, he says, "is far from deploring the order of things ... . He struggles toward Nirvana with the same glorious victoriosity that the Christian has in anticipating his goal, eternal life."[16] The topoi of 'struggle' and 'victory' evoked here refer Buddhism back to the alleged noble agility of the 'Aryan conquerors': Buddhism appears, at least to some extent, as a renovation of the victorious 'Aryan' spirit. Still, the said victory

[11] „Selbstverständlich ist es unsre erste Aufgabe, die geschichtlichen, nationalen Voraussetzungen, den Grund und Boden, auf dem der Buddhismus ruht, vor allem das religiöse Leben und die philosophische Spekulation des vorbuddhistischen Indien zu charakterisieren." (OLDENBERG 1921: 7)

[12] For a review of the history of this idea, and the criticisms levelled against it that includes Indian scholarship on the subject, see BRYANT 2001.

[13] „[...] dass an die Stelle des Ariers, des stolzen Verwandten der Griechen und Germanen, der Hindu tritt mit seiner Schwächlichkeit und biegsamen Gewandtheit, seiner Nervosität, seiner heißen Sinnlichkeit." (OLDENBERG 1921: 12)

[14] „Die unausbleiblichen Mischungen mit der dunklen Urbevölkerungen [...]"(OLDENBERG 1921: 12)

[15] „[...] und der Volksseele jener Zug tatabgewandter Schwäche sich aufgeprägt hat, der ihr durch allen Wechsel der Geschicke geblieben ist and bleiben wird, so lange es ein indisches Volk gibt." (OLDENBERG 1921: 12)

[16] „[...] der Buddhist ist fern davon, die Ordnung der Dinge [...] zu beklagen [...] Er strebt dem Nirvâna mit derselben Siegesfreudigkeit entgegen, mit welcher der Christ auf sein Ziel, das ewige Leben hinblickt." (OLDENBERG 1921: 255–256)

consists in being saved from "the painful world of arising and perishing".[17]

In the increasingly racist and Anti-Semitic atmosphere of late 19th and early 20th century, positioning Buddhism as an 'Aryan' religion was part and parcel of establishing it as a "world religion" – indeed, as Kohara observes in his book on "The politics of religion" (KOHARA 2010: 48), as *the* second world religion vis-à-vis Christianity (Judaism and Islam being identified as Semitic and, therefore, inferior forms of monotheism). At the same time, describing Buddhism as essentially a religion of world-negation served well to foster ideas about the superiority of Christianity as a religion that would embrace both transcendence and immanence.

This figure of thought is taken up (albeit with modifications) by the sociologist Max Weber and the philosopher Ernst Cassirer. Both were of seminal importance for subsequent approaches to intercultural comparative studies in their fields and beyond and both rely to a large extent on Oldenberg in their characterisations of Buddhism. Both take it as a given that the essence of Buddhist doctrine is to be found in the oldest sources, and both derive from their readings of contemporary Buddhology the conclusion that Buddhism is a religion of negation, including the negation of both the secular world and all the distinct personal deities. To quote Weber:

[17] „[...] aus der leidvollen Welt des Entstehens und Vergehens". (OLDENBERG 1921: 314)

> Ancient Buddhism is in almost all respects the characteristic antipode both of Confucianism and Islam. It is the specifically unpolitical and anti-political class religion – or, more precisely put, the religious "doctrine of art" – of itinerant, intellectually erudite mendicants. It is, like all Indian philosophy or hierurgy, a "religion of salvation", if we want to apply the term „religion" to an ethics without god – or, more correctly, with an absolute indifference concerning the question of "gods", of he fact and mode of their existence – and without a cult.[18]

In conceiving of Buddhism as a religion with "absolute indifference" towards all "gods", and – consequently? – "without a cult", Weber expresses an important idea that, however evaluated and interpreted, had to shape the attitude towards Buddhist material objects: If that was the essence of Buddhism, sacral images and, even more so, ritual implements, could only embody a lesser, possibly degenerate form of this religion. Weber goes on to state:

[18] „ Der alte Buddhismus ist in fast allen praktisch entscheidenden Punkten der charakteristische Gegenpol des Konfuzianismus sowohl wie etwa des Islam. Er ist die spezifisch unpolitische und antipolitische Standesreligion oder richtiger gesagt: religiöse „Kunstlehre" eines wandernden, intellektuell geschulten, Bettelmönchtums. Er ist, wie alle indische Philosophie und Hierurgie, „Erlösungsreligion", wenn man den Namen "Religion" auf eine Ethik ohne Gott - oder richtiger: mit absoluter Gleichgültigkeit gegen die Frage, ob es "Götter" gibt und wie sie existieren - und ohne Kultus anwenden will." (WEBER 1988: 220; translation mine)

From those general premises of soteriologically interested Indian intellectuals, the Buddha's teaching [...] draws only the final conclusion in exposing any belief in a "soul" as a perennial entity as the root cause of all illusions that work against salvation. And from this it derives the futility of all adherence to inclinations, hopes, and wishes connected to such "animistic" beliefs, to all thiswordly and, in particular, otherworldly life. All this is clinging to transient inanities. [...] The aim is not salvation towards eternal life, but towards an eternal mortal repose.[19]

As a sociologist, Weber is obviously more interested in analysing the consequences of this doctrine for the social actions of individuals, than in their psychological effects or philosophical interpretation. His pertinent characterisation classifies Buddhism as an extreme form of world-denying mysticism: Buddhism in practice is based on "egocentric" (*egozentrische[s]*; Weber 1988: 223) knowledge, an "a-social" (*asoziale;* Weber 1988: 230) religion, its highest ideal lies not in action, but in the realisation of a stable state of tranquillity, and there is "no bridge" leading from this ideal to the "world of rational action" [20] In its essence, Buddhism is thus *not* a universalist religion, but rather the specific doctrine pertinent for the estate of the mendicant ascetics. Weber seems to be aware that this 'idealised' image does not conform even to the realities of the earliest Buddhist communities – they were communities of lay followers and mendicants after all (Weber 1988: 233–234). Nevertheless, he reiterates his evaluation in juxtaposing Buddhist to Christian ethics - and, unsurprisingly, the Buddhist paradigm comes out as the deficient one:

Buddhist monastic ethic does not outvie the "innerworldly" ethical practice performed within the social order in a rational manner and based on a special gift of grace, as later on Christian monastic ethic will do. Quite to the contrary, it goes in the opposite, fundamentally a-social direction.[21]

Ernst Cassirer in his opus magnum *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* gave

[19] „[…] der indischen soteriologisch interessierten Intelligenz zieht die Lehre des Buddha - wie sie sich schon in der von Rhys Davids geistvoll interpretierten ersten Ansprache nach der „Erleuchtung" äußert - nur die letzte Konsequenz, indem sie die Grundursache aller erlösungsfeindlichen Illusionen in dem Glauben an eine „Seele" überhaupt als einer perennierenden Einheit aufdeckt. Daraus folgert sie die Sinnlosigkeit des Haftens an allen und jeden mit dem „animistischen" Glauben zusammenhängenden Neigungen, Hoffnungen und Wünschen: an allem diesseitigem und, vor allem, auch jenseitigem Leben. Das alles ist ein Haften an vergänglichen Nichtigkeiten. [...] Nicht Erlösung zu einem ewigen Leben also, sondern zur ewigen Todesruhe wird begehrt." (Weber 1988: 221, 222; translation mine)

[20] „Dies ist ausschlaggebend für die gesamte Stellung des „Arhat" - Ideals zur „Welt" des rationalen Handelns: es gibt von jenem zu diesem keine Brücke." (Weber 1988: 230; translation mine)

[21] „Die buddhistische Mönchsethik ist eben nicht, wie die spätere christliche, ein auf besondere Gnadengaben gestütztes rational - ethisches Überbieten des in den sozialen Ordnungen verlaufenden, „innerweltlichen" ethischen Handelns, sondern sie verläuft nach der gerade entgegengesetzten, prinzipiell asozialen, Richtung. (Weber 1988: 235; translation mine).

a similar characterisation of Buddhism (Cassirer 1994). As a philosopher, he highlighted especially what he perceived as its denial of the person or self, which to him also explained the alleged 'atheism' of this religion:

> For Buddhism, even the I, the individual and the individual "soul" have to be relegated to this sphere of Nothingness [...] , because, even though it is in its essential content and aim, a pure religion of salvation, the salvation it seeks is not the salvation *of* the individual self, but *from* the individual self. [...] And together with the substantialist soul its religious correlate and counterpoint, the substantial deity, must also vanish. Buddha did not deny the existence of those gods revered by popular religion. But to him, they were nothing but singular beings subject to the law of transiency like every other singular being.[22]

The image of Buddhism emerging from these descriptions and evaluations given by leading scholars and intellectuals of the day from various disciplines is, in spite of variations in emphasis and accentuation, fairly consistent – and it is important to see that it was held both by "neutral" scholars (who, however, without exception subscribed to the modernist Eurocentric paradigm of the day) and by contemporary German sympathisers or even propagators of "Buddhism".[23] To summarise - and generalise, albeit hypothetically - there is ample evidence that from the late 19th to the first half of the 20th century, "Buddhism" was primarily imagined as an "Indian" religion of "self and world denial" that, in its essence, was dedicated to a peculiar form of self-perfection via the annihilation of all emotional and intellectual engagement with the world and the individual self. The essential practice of Buddhism, then, could only be meditative contemplation. Any form of cult, and, consequently, all more elaborate instances of material culture, would have to be classified as "external" to the essence of the religion – and, most probably, as signs of deviation from and deformation of its essence. In the classical modern paradigms of religion and philology, both East Asian Buddhist ways and Buddhist material culture in general could be of secondary value and importance at best.

[22] „Für den Buddhismus muss auch das Ich, muss das Individuum und die individuelle ‚Seele', diesem Gebiet des Nichts zugewiesen werden ... Denn wenngleich er seinem wesentlichen Gehalt und Ziel nach reine Erlösungsreligion ist, so ist doch die Erlösung, die er sucht, nicht die *des* individuellen ich, sondern die *vom* individuellen Ich. ... Und zugleich mit der substantiellen Seele muss hier auch ihr religöses Korrelat und Gegenbild: die substantielle Gottheit verschwinden. Buddha hat die Götter der Volksreligion nicht geleugnet; aber sie sind ihm nichts anderes als Einzelwesen, die, wie alles Einzelne, dem Gesetz des Vergehens unterworfen sind." (Cassirer 1994: 295)

[23] The English and French literature cited by Weber and Cassirer gives reason to believe that this would be true for other European countries as well.

Entangled Images: The Study and Propagation of "Japanese Buddhism"

Although this evaluation would naturally not be shared completely by Japanese religious experts and lay people committed in varying modes and degrees to Buddhist ways, accommodated variants of the modern paradigms were at work both in state policies and corresponding strategies of Buddhist institutions. Furthermore, it was echoed in which modern scholars and propagators of Japanese Buddhism, especially those active on an international stage, presented the religion both at home and abroad.

Starting from the level of social and political realities, it is well acknowledged by now that religious life in Japan from ancient times up to the Meiji period was dominated by what has recently been called the "combinatory paradigm"(Teeuwen and Rambelli 2003) of common to complementary adherence to the Buddha way and cult of the "deities of heaven and earth" (*jingi* 神祇). In contrast, the modern nation was conceptualised by the Meiji oligarchy in accord with European precedents, as a time-transcending ethno-linguistic and moral community. The origin of this imagined supra-temporal community seen in the "age of the gods" (and was placed beyond dispute). Any essential commitment to Buddhist ways was eliminated from this idea of the Japanese nation. While the Meiji state revived the terminology of the ancient *ritsuryō* state in naming its institutions, it accordingly discontinued the time-honoured practice of employing Buddhist nstitutions for ritual. Instead, it initiated the (in-)famous "separation of *kami* and Buddhas" (*shinbutsu bunri* 神仏分離)[24], which, as Isomae Jun'ichi observed, for the first time created a consciousness of "Buddhism" and "Shinto" as unified (and, to some extent, mutually exclusive) categories (Isomae 2003). As a consequence of the state's endorsement of Shinto as the basis of national morality, Buddhism was both relegated to the sphere of private religion and subordinated to public Shinto morality. This was the fundamental restriction in the 1889 constitution's concerning the "freedom of religion". Under these conditions, Buddhist institutions competed among each other and with other religions to prove their usefulness to the empire (Kohara 2010). In general, Buddhism was excluded from the dominant imagination of the nation and under pressure to legitimise its place in Japanese culture.

These socio-cultural conditions, as well as the reception of the European paradigms of religion and philology, shaped the way Buddhism was perceived and portrayed by Japanese intellectuals in the late 19th and much of the 20th century. In practice, both Shinto and Buddhist institutions revived some aspects of combinatory religion already in the later Meiji period.[25] In theory and intellectual discourse, however,

[24] This process is well documented and researched, see e.g. Yasumaru 2006.

[25] See Thal 2002 for an account of the ways in which Shintō shrines reincorporated their "Buddhist" heritage. LoBreglio 2009 illustrates how one Buddhist school renegotiated the boundaries

the separation was maintained much longer. In the emerging fields of Japanese Buddhology and History of Religion, emphasis was placed on clearly defined doctrines and, concomitantly, the primary focus was on the great founding figures, who, as religious geniuses, had purportedly created the essence of each denomination's teaching. Anesaki Masaharu, a founding figure of religious studies in modern Japan, set a model with his *Religious history of Japan: an outline* (published first in English in 1907, and then in Japanese in a collection of essays on *Religion and Education* in 1912) and its expanded version, *History of Japanese Religion*, which consistently described each school by a presentation of the founding figure's biography and doctrine.[26] Isomae Jun'ichi has highlighted the paradigmatic function of Christian Protestantism which led, around the same time, Hara Katsurō to establish the preeminence of the schools established in the early Medieval (Kamakura) period ("Kamakura New Buddhism", j. *Kamakura shin Bukkyō* 鎌倉新仏教):

Hara offered New Medieval Buddhism as a competitor to Protestantism because of its similarities, such as the presence of founders, scriptures, church, and its ability to save people on a national scale. Hara's attempt was followed by Naitō Kanji (1941)[27], who compared New Medieval Buddhism with Protestantism in an effort to avoke a spirit of modern capitalism through Weberian "Entzauberung". (Isomae 2003)

One should not forget, however, that the predilection Japanese intellectuals have shown for Kamakura New Buddhism was also fostered by the nationalist aspect of the classical modern paradigm (Porcu 2008; Sharf 1995). These schools seemed attractive because, it was argued, they transformed what had so far remained a religion of the elite, replete with foreign elements, into a popular religion – and thereby created a genuinely *Japanese* religion on a par with Christian (i.e. "Western") Protestantism. This pattern of preference for Kamakura New Buddhism was only broken in Japanese (and later, Western) historiography of Japanese religion with Kuroda Toshios seminal studies in the social realities of medieval monasteries and shrines, which led to his famous "exoteric-esoteric system" (*kenmitsu taisei* 顯密体制) theory (Kuroda 1996; Payne 1998).[28]

Significantly, the "Japanese spirituality" (Suzuki 1972) leading figures such as Suzuki Daisetz or Watsuji Tetsurō found in Kamakura New Buddhism was couched in terms of either simple faith in the "other power" of Amida or of direct, personal ex-

to other denominations, including its relation to the veneration of *kami* (see esp. p. 84).

[26] Anesaki 1907 and 1912; many surveys of Japanese religion, both Japanese and Western, have followed this pattern; Tachikawa 1995 and Yusa 2002 are more recent examples.

[27] The reference is to Naitō 1978.

[28] By now, the classical modern paradigm seems to have be replaced by an emphasis on practice and ritual, as is evident from the monumental essay collection *Japanese Religions* (Dolce 2012), which dedicates three of its four volumes to the issues of "practice".

perience of transcendental reality (Suzuki's *satori,* Suzuki 1970: 229–263). It was, of course, in the latter shape that "Japanese Buddhism" became popular in Europe and North America: not in its historical guise as a highly institutionalised, state sponsored religion with a large estate of monastic clerics who were, first and foremost, experts of elaborate ritual, but in the "Protestantised" and "personalised" version of globally informed lay intellectuals, who emphasised individual faith and direct experience, and touted it as a remedy against the ills of "Western" modernity.[29] Again, in this imagination of Japanese Buddhism, ritual and material culture could only be of secondary importance, and was valued as inessential or superficial.

Images against Imagination: The Case of Japanese Buddhist Objects

If we survey the Buddhist objects from Japan that were acquired by European collectors and museums during the late 19th and first half of the 20th century, it is obvious that, by and large, they went against the grain of contemporary convictions pertaining both to religion in general and Buddhism in particular, and of Japan and Japanese culture. What was one to make of pictures such as a Kasuga Mandala, which not only presented an *animal* as an object of veneration, but in addition mixed Buddhist ("foreign") and Shinto ("indigenous") motifs, thus not even qualifying itself as an expression of simple, genuine, autochthonous national faith? How would one place copies of the Taima Mandala, representing devotion to Amida Buddha in a form older and more "Catholic" than taught by the founders of the Pure Land Buddhist Schools in the Kamakura period? What with all the devotional images of Kannon – a figure not even extant in the Pali canon, and a fortiori, in the "Ur-" Buddhism valued above all by the philologist paradigm – and so obviously not directed at lofty ideas of world-denial, but tokens of a this-worldly Buddhism? And how could one not see all the ritual implements as signs of a degenerate, exteriorised form of this essentially contemplative religion of self-perfection? I think it is clear that the dominant paradigms of understanding must have predisposed experts involved in the evaluation and allocation of Buddhist objects to see them as something of secondary importance and value, although this question would deserve much further attention and research. It is safe to say, however, that European Japanologists and students of Japanese religion at that time

[29] Robert Sharf (1993) traced the roots of the orientation to personal experience to the reception of European and North American contemporary psychology and philosophy; see also his insightful answer to the question: "Why [...] would anyone in the West take this view of Zen seriously? [...] The notion of a 'pure' Zen – a pan-cultural religious experience unsullied by institutional, social, and historical contingencies – would be attractive precisely because it held out the possibility of an alternative to the godless and indifferent anomic universe bequeathed by the Western Enlightenment, yet demanded neither blind faith nor institutional allegiance. This reconstructed Zen offered an intellectually reputable escape from the epistemological anxiety of historicism and pluralism." (Sharf 1995: 49–50)

did not care to look at and reflect upon these objects – but there is a great interest in them today, after the paradigm change from doctrine to practice, from belief to material culture.

Our review of classical modern images of Buddhism in general and Japanese Buddhism in particular has shown how various elements of the modern outlook worked together in relegating Japanese Buddhism to secondary importance, and preventing serious consideration and reflection of the meaning of this material. It is, however, high time to review this evaluation and to take these objects seriously as expressions of Japanese Buddhism as it really existed over time. It is to be hoped that museums will regard these possessions with renewed interest and present them to the public, and that they will be studied extensively by scholars of all pertinent disciplines.

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Part II

Remarks on Japanese Buddhist Art